CHECKLIST ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Project Name:	North Western Energy Communications Tower/Madison County
Proposed Implementation Date:	Summer 2013
Proponent:	NorthWestern Energy Corporation
Location:	Section 16, Township 4 South, Range 5 West
County:	Madison County

I. TYPE AND PURPOSE OF ACTION

NorthWestern Energy (NWE) is proposing to install a 60 foot tall communications tower in the NE¼NE¼ of Section 4, T4S, R5W in Madison County, as well as utilize an existing 2-track trail to access the communications site from Dry Georgia Gulch road, and install an underground electrical line to power the communication site. The site would also include a building, propane tank and a chain link fence to keep people from entering the location. The site would have an approximate 100' x 100' foot print. North Western Energy is proposing to use the tower for internal communication use only. The tower would provide: control and monitoring to the Substations in the area and a NWE mobile radio repeater antenna and a microwave link to their headquarters office in Butte.

II. PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

1. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT, AGENCIES, GROUPS OR INDIVIDUALS CONTACTED:
Provide a brief chronology of the scoping and ongoing involvement for this project.

MT Fish Wildlife & Parks
Craig Fager, Wildlife Biologist
730 North Montana
Dillon, MT 59725

Ed & Katherine Guinnane
PO Box 57
Alder, MT 59710

SRI River Holdings
PO Box 447
Twin Bridges, MT59754

Bradley Livestock
PO Box 295
Twin Bridges, MT 59754

Madison County Commissioners
110 West Wallace
PO Box 278
Virginia City, MT 59755

Madison County Airport
Barbie Durham, Secretary
PO Box 278
Virginia City, MT 59755

The applicant for the Land Use License contacted the State grazing lessee, **Ed & Katherine Guinnane**, regarding this project and obtained a signed lessee settlement agreement.

2. OTHER GOVERNMENTAL AGENCIES WITH JURISDICTION, LIST OF PERMITS NEEDED:

- FAA Aeronautical Evaluation Report

3. ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED:

Proposed Alternative: Issue a Land Use License to NorthWestern Energy to allow the erection of a 60 foot tall communications tower in a 100'x100' area, utilize an existing 2-track trail for access, and install underground electricity to the site.

No Action Alternative: Deny the request by NorthWestern Energy to erect the communications tower.

III. IMPACTS ON THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

- *RESOURCES potentially impacted are listed on the form, followed by common issues that would be considered.*
- *Explain POTENTIAL IMPACTS AND MITIGATIONS following each resource heading.*
- *Enter "NONE" If no impacts are identified or the resource is not present.*

4. GEOLOGY AND SOIL QUALITY, STABILITY AND MOISTURE:
Consider the presence of fragile, compactable or unstable soils. Identify unusual geologic features. Specify any special reclamation considerations. Identify any cumulative impacts to soils.

The communications tower is proposed to be located on a rocky finger ridge that is located in the NE¼ NE1/4 of section 4 T4S – R5W. The soils in the Land Use License (LUL) communications site area consist of Crago very stony loam. The parent material for these types of soils is gravelly alluvium derived from limestone. Land capability for these soils is 7s. The NRCS Soil Survey indicates that this soil rates as "very limited" for building site development due to large rocks and unstable excavation. Corrosion of concrete is low in these soils.

The actual tower site and building will be the only areas where excavation will occur and both would have concrete footings and foundation. It is not anticipated that the action alternative would cause any significant impacts to geology or soils in the proposal area.

5. WATER QUALITY, QUANTITY AND DISTRIBUTION:
Identify important surface or groundwater resources. Consider the potential for violation of ambient water quality standards, drinking water maximum contaminant levels, or degradation of water quality. Identify cumulative effects to water resources.

There are no water sources near the proposed location for the tower and access road. The soils are well drained and no significant erosion problems are anticipated at the sites location. No significant impacts to water quality, quantity and distribution are expected to occur as a result of implementing the proposed action alternative.

6. AIR QUALITY:
What pollutants or particulate would be produced? Identify air quality regulations or zones (e.g. Class I air shed) the project would influence. Identify cumulative effects to air quality.

No significant impacts to air quality standards are expected if the action alternative is implemented.

7. VEGETATION COVER, QUANTITY AND QUALITY:
What changes would the action cause to vegetative communities? Consider rare plants or cover types that would be affected. Identify cumulative effects to vegetation.

A search of the Montana Natural Heritage Program database indicated that no plant species of concern are located on the subject section. The actual area that will be disturbed by the tower and associated structures is

minimal. The total area included in the License is 100'x100' while the tower base, equipment building and emergency generator would cover an area less than 400 square feet. No significant impacts to vegetation cover, quantity or quality are expected as a result of implementing the proposed action outside of the proposal area.

8. TERRESTRIAL, AVIAN AND AQUATIC LIFE AND HABITATS:
Consider substantial habitat values and use of the area by wildlife, birds or fish. Identify cumulative effects to fish and wildlife.

No significant impacts to terrestrial, avian and aquatic life and habitats would occur as a result of implementing the proposed alternative.

9. UNIQUE, ENDANGERED, FRAGILE OR LIMITED ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES:
Consider any federally listed threatened or endangered species or habitat identified in the project area. Determine effects to wetlands. Consider Sensitive Species or Species of special concern. Identify cumulative effects to these species and their habitat.

A proposed project area search of the Montana Natural Heritage Program database identified five vertebrate animals that are listed as a species of concern, threatened, or endangered: Hoary bat, Townsend's Big-eared bat, Great Blue Heron, Golden eagle and Wolverine.

Townsend's Big-eared Bat is listed as a species of concern. Their distribution includes most of the state. There could be hibernacula or roosting areas in the vicinity. The proposal area could be used as a forage area for bats, as their range can extend from 10-25 kilometers from their roosting area, however the tower would have a small footprint 100' X 100' and should not affect the overall habitat. The proposed action is not expected to have a significant impact on the Townsend's Big-eared Bat.

Hoary Bat is listed as a species of concern due to declining numbers**.** It's the biggest bat found in Montana and is migratory showing up in Montana in late summer and feeds in riparian water ways and conifer forests. It rarely roosts in Montana. This communication site has a small foot print 100 x100 feet and its construction would have little effect on the Hoary Bat. If the action alternative was implemented no long term or cumulative effects to the Hoary Bat population would be anticipated.

Great Blue Heron is listed as a species of concern and has been observed near the project location. The birds sightings includes the Ruby River and Wet Georgia Creek which are near the proposed project (within a few miles). The habitat that the tower is located on would not provide good habitat for Great Blue Herons for they mainly live in riparian areas. No long term or cumulative effects are anticipated to Great Blue Herons from this proposal.

Golden Eagle is listed as a species of concern and has been observed within the project area. The birds have a large home range and in some instances are migratory. Management of healthy Golden Eagle populations requires maintaining prey habitat where eagles forage. This involves sustaining native grasslands and shrub-steppe landscapes which are the prime habitats for jackrabbits. This proposal has a small footprint 100X100 feet. Little eagle habitat will be effected by this proposal. No long term or cumulative effects are anticipated to golden eagles or their habitat from this proposal.

Wolverine is considered a species of concern and has been observed within the project area. The location is not prime habitat for wolverines for they are secretive animals but have large home ranges and travel great distances seeking mates. Much of the west side of the Tobacco Root Mountains fall within the wolverine home range and have been observed in unlikely locations. This proposal would have little effect on wolverine's or wolverine habitat; it would have a small footprint and the construction timeline would be of short duration. No long term or cumulative impacts are anticipated from this proposal.

10. HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES:
Identify and determine effects to historical, archaeological or paleontological resources.

A review of the tower site was conducted during a site visit by Tim Egan, Unit Manager and no cultural resources were identified in the project area. DNRC archeologist Patrick Rennie was contacted about this proposal and the following reply was received; "a Class I (literature review) level review was conducted by the DNRC staff archeologist for the area of potential effect (APE). This entailed inspection of project maps, DNRC sites/site leads database, land use records, general Land Office Survey Plats, and control cards. The Class I search results revealed that no cultural or paleontological resources have been identified in the APE, but it should be noted that Class III level inventory work has not been conducted there to date.

Because the topographic setting and geology suggest a low to moderate likelihood of the presence of cultural or paleontological resources, the proposed project is expected to have *No Effect to Antiquities*. No additional archaeological investigative work will be conducted, however, if previously unknown cultural or paleontological materials are identified during project related activities, all work will cease until a professional assessment of such resources can be made."

11. AESTHETICS:

Determine if the project is located on a prominent topographic feature, or may be visible from populated or scenic areas. What level of noise, light or visual change would be produced? Identify cumulative effects to aesthetics.

The proposed tower would be 60 feet in height. Due to its size and location on a finger ridge, it will be partially visible during certain times of the day. Additionally, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) may require some type of light on the structure that will be visible at night, but a final determination has not been made by the FAA. The initial FAA Aeronautical Evaluation Report indicated that no painting or marking would be required on the tower. The overall impact on the aesthetics of the area is not expected to be significant due to the lattice nature of the structure and its distance from populated centers.

12. DEMANDS ON ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES OF LAND, WATER, AIR OR ENERGY:

Determine the amount of limited resources the project would require. Identify other activities nearby that the project would affect. Identify cumulative effects to environmental resources.

No significant impacts to environmental resources of land, water, air or energy are expected to occur as a result of implementing the proposed action alternative.

13. OTHER ENVIRONMENTAL DOCUMENTS PERTINENT TO THE AREA:

List other studies, plans or projects on this tract. Determine cumulative impacts likely to occur as a result of current private, state or federal actions in the analysis area, and from future proposed state actions in the analysis area that are under MEPA review (scoped) or permitting review by any state agency.

The city of Sheridan and Madison County have proposals currently under consideration for moving the Dry Georgia Gulch County Road to accommodate an updated sewage disposal treatment facility for the city of Sheridan. If the County and city's proposal is implemented the county road would be moved on to State land to accommodate a 200 foot buffer zone that is required by the Montana DEQ. The moving of the County Road is in the scoping process, but would have no cumulative effects or impacts on this proposal if the road is moved.

IV. IMPACTS ON THE HUMAN POPULATION

- *RESOURCES potentially impacted are listed on the form, followed by common issues that would be considered.*
- *Explain POTENTIAL IMPACTS AND MITIGATIONS following each resource heading.*
- *Enter "NONE" If no impacts are identified or the resource is not present.*

14. HUMAN HEALTH AND SAFETY:
Identify any health and safety risks posed by the project.

No significant impacts to human health and safety are expected to occur as a result of implementing the proposed alternative.

15. INDUSTRIAL, COMMERCIAL AND AGRICULTURE ACTIVITIES AND PRODUCTION:
Identify how the project would add to or alter these activities.

The issuance of the proposed Land Use License will allow NorthWestern Energy to erect a communication tower. The tower would provide: control and monitoring to the Sheridan and Horse Prairie Substations; a NWE mobile radio repeater antenna and a microwave link to the NWE central office in Butte.

16. QUANTITY AND DISTRIBUTION OF EMPLOYMENT:
Estimate the number of jobs the project would create, move or eliminate. Identify cumulative effects to the employment market.

The proposed action of erecting the tower and installing an underground power source will not create any new jobs. It is expected that NorthWestern will be responsible for completing most of the construction work; however, there could be some outside contractors utilized for short periods. Therefore, the proposed action would not have a significant impact on employment in the immediate area.

17. LOCAL AND STATE TAX BASE AND TAX REVENUES:
Estimate tax revenue the project would create or eliminate. Identify cumulative effects to taxes and revenue.

NorthWestern Energy would be responsible for paying taxes on the tower, however the amount is not expected to be very large based on the type of structure proposed. The proposal would have little effect on taxes in Madison or the state level if the proposal is implemented.

18. DEMAND FOR GOVERNMENT SERVICES:
Estimate increases in traffic and changes to traffic patterns. What changes would be needed to fire protection, police, schools, etc.? Identify cumulative effects of this and other projects on government services

The implementation of the proposed action alternative will not generate an increase in demand for government services.

19. LOCALLY ADOPTED ENVIRONMENTAL PLANS AND GOALS:
List State, County, City, USFS, BLM, Tribal, and other zoning or management plans, and identify how they would affect this project.

Madison County does have an adopted Growth Policy that covers the entire County and the proposed action alternative does not conflict with any building or zoning laws in Madison County.

20. ACCESS TO AND QUALITY OF RECREATIONAL AND WILDERNESS ACTIVITIES:
Identify any wilderness or recreational areas nearby or access routes through this tract. Determine the effects of the project on recreational potential within the tract. Identify cumulative effects to recreational and wilderness activities.

The State land where the proposal is located does not have legal access via a county road. The approval of the Land Use License would require NWE to secure a road easement from Ed and Kathy Guinnane to access the site. NWE has secured an agreement that allows them to access the tower location but does not allow them to improve the two track road.

The location of a communications tower on this site is not expected to have an adverse effect on the recreation or hunting activity on this section.

21. DENSITY AND DISTRIBUTION OF POPULATION AND HOUSING:
Estimate population changes and additional housing the project would require. Identify cumulative effects to population and housing.

The proposed alternative would have no adverse effect on density and distribution of population and housing.

22. SOCIAL STRUCTURES AND MORES:
Identify potential disruption of native or traditional lifestyles or communities.

There are no native, unique or traditional lifestyles or communities in the vicinity that would be impacted by the proposed alternative.

23. CULTURAL UNIQUENESS AND DIVERSITY:
How would the action affect any unique quality of the area?

The proposed alternative would not directly impact cultural uniqueness or diversity.

24. OTHER APPROPRIATE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CIRCUMSTANCES:
Estimate the return to the trust. Include appropriate economic analysis. Identify potential future uses for the analysis area other than existing management. Identify cumulative economic and social effects likely to occur as a result of the proposed action.

The Common Schools Trust will benefit by getting a rental fee from NorthWestern Energy of $1,200.00/year for the use of the 2-track trail and the communications site in the first 5 years of the LUL and then $1,500.00/year for the second five year period.

EA Checklist Prepared By:	**Name:**	Tim Egan	**Date:**	May 25, 2013
	Title:	Unit Manager, Dillon Unit		

V. FINDING

25. ALTERNATIVE SELECTED: Proposed action

26. SIGNIFICANCE OF POTENTIAL IMPACTS:

The potential for significant adverse impacts is minimal for the proposed project. Potential adverse impacts will be avoided or mitigated by the project scope and the required mitigation measures.

Mitigation measures:

1. The Licensor will be provided final plans and specifications which shall be approved by Licensor prior to any construction.

2. Licensee shall be responsible for maintenance of access road on state land if erosion or drainage problems occur.

3. The use of the tower is limited to the Licensee's internal communications system. Any other user on this tower shall be approved by Licensor prior to installation. The addition of other tower users may result in an increase in rent due to Licensor based on the type of user and service proposed.

4. All necessary permits will be secured before any activities begin.

5. Disturbed areas will be seeded with native grass species and a weed management plan will be implemented with Madison County for this proposal.

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27. NEED FOR FURTHER ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS:

[ ]	EIS	[ ]	More Detailed EA	[X]	No Further Analysis

EA Checklist Approved By:	**Name:**	Hoyt Richards
	Title:	CLO Area Manager
Signature: /s/	**Date**:	5/29/2013